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# Communicating Citizenship – Social Positioning in Participatory Decision Making

*Alfons Bora und Heiko Hausendorf*

Social decisions about new science and technology inevitably entail fundamental questions of social inclusion and exclusion, or in a more political language, of the close relation between science, technology, and democracy (Jasanoff 2004; Kitcher 2001; Kleinman 2000; Sclove 1995; Ezrahi 1990). Questions of citizenship and governance are therefore both closely interrelated with a demand for democratic participation in this field. We are interested in empirical forms of citizenship in participatory discourse. We understand »citizenship« as a semantic that has to do with the inclusion in the political system. Our main interest with the term »communicating citizenship« is to indicate a theoretical approach that – in contrast to many normative approaches and theories – allows for the empirical observation of citizenship.

This understanding of »citizenship« and this sort of »empirical turn« towards the communication of citizenship are based on a theoretical perspective that combines systems theory with socio-linguistic methodology, based on a shared communication theory. »Communicating citizenship« is the programmatic keyword for studying the semantics, by means of which inclusion in the political system is realized. On this basis, we can look for its empirical realisation in participatory discourse.

Our main argument is the following: The empirical appearance of »citizenship« in participatory discourse is characterised by a »universal« function – namely, inclusion in the political system – but at the same time by divergent, idiosyncratic and essentially contested structures. The empirical construction of citizenship in participatory procedures has inclusive and exclusive effects, depending on the given institutional and procedural frame.

This empirical picture came out of a just finished EU research project in which we studied participatory discourse in the case of modern biotechnology.<sup>1</sup> The results essentially provoke our often-emphatic understanding of participation as a

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promising mechanism of good governance. They point to some structural problems with participatory discourse.

This article will argue as follows: To begin with, we will briefly sketch the theoretical concept and the central question (1), then we will give a condensed impression of some empirical results from our research project (2), and finally, we mention a few conclusions drawn from the study (3).

## 1. »Citizenship« as a Mode of Political Inclusion

When talking about »citizenship« we suggest distinguishing two levels of analysis:

1. The first is the level of contents. It refers to the semantic of »citizenship« itself, the discussion about what is or should be an aspect of adequate citizenship. How do we define a citizen? Which rights are inherent to a citizen's position or should be attributed to a citizen? Most of the normative and political argument about »citizenship« is located on this dimension. This normative reflection is deeply rooted in history, in the ancient world of Greeks and Romans, the Renaissance, and the emerging debate about citizen rights in the enlightenment and the great political revolutions, until the newest developments in political theory and philosophy. The key text in the modern debate is, of course, Thomas H. Marshall's »Citizenship and Social Class« (Marshall 1950), which had far-reaching influence, think for instance of Benjamin R. Barber's notion of »Strong Democracy« or, more recently, the concepts of »cultural citizenship« (Turner) or »technological citizenship« (Frankenfeld 1992) and the like.

Our intention is not to engage in this discussion, but rather to reconstruct the social function of it in order to better understand empirical and theoretical problems connected with the notion of »citizenship«. The institution of rights does not say very much about the reality of citizenship.

2. Therefore, the second level in our distinction is the level of function. We will talk about this aspect in the following. Here the central interest is to reconstruct the social task or problem that is being treated by using the semantic of citizenship in social communication.

When looking at the function, we clearly see that all concepts of citizenship – from the early Athenian polis to the contemporary debate – deal with a certain aspect of the relationship between people and the society. As Peter W. Preston (1997) says, the concept of citizenship answers the question, who belongs to a polity, how the members of the polity in general are regarded, and how they exercise

power. In more sociological terms, »citizenship« is dealing with the question of inclusion into the political system.

It was Talcott Parsons, who first spoke about inclusion as being the social function of citizenship (1966, 1971). From Parsons' point of view, citizenship has the function of including persons in the societal community. This view somehow contrasts with the observation that from the ancient time until today the status of the »cives« is understood in relation not so much to the community but rather to the central power, the polis, the res publica, or in modern terms: to the state, as the organisation of the polity. Against this background, we therefore argue that citizenship is a mode of inclusion in the political system.

In contemporary systems theory, the term inclusion refers to the question of how human beings are connected with social (that is communication) systems, namely by addressability. »Addressing« in this context means, that the social structures contain positions and roles for human actors. Inclusion then is a general concept, treating the problem of addressability of persons in a communication system: Who is, when and under which conditions a relevant speaker?

We describe social systems as communication systems, and inclusion as an aspect of communication, namely as taking persons into account as relevant communicative addresses. In so doing, we can analyse citizenship as an empirical »question of voice«, a theoretical demand that Hubert Heinelt (2002) has recently formulated, that is rather as a question of position than of membership.

And this question of voice is related to the institutional context that frames the communicative construction of citizenship. In contrast to other scientists, we have argued that inclusion is a gradual and modal concept; that means, it allows for a broad range of very strongly differentiated forms of addressing persons (Bora 2002). Against this background, »citizenship« mainly means inclusion in the organisation of political power, the state, and its activities, such as administration. And it can be instituted in very different ways and in different procedures. Therefore, we have to assume that procedure and institutional context make an empirically observable difference. Participatory procedures are in particular intended to improve »citizenship«.

The central question then is: Do the participatory arrangements, which have been built up in order to »improve« citizenship, indeed allow for social inclusion, and if so, under which conditions?

## 2. Multiple »Citizenships«

In our project PARADYS – Participation and the dynamics of social positioning – we conducted a comparative study in seven European countries in order to analyse the communicative construction of »citizenship« under varying institutional and procedural conditions. Based on a common methodology, namely the conversation analysis, we studied communications in licensing procedures in the field of plant biotechnology. In this field, demands for participation and »technological citizenship« have most prominently come to be heard in the last decade. The focus of the research was on all communicative forms of citizen participation in these procedures.

### *Social position*

»Social position« is defined as a set of communicated expectations with respect to the following structural dimensions:

1. Relevant actors
2. Image of Self
3. Relevant topics
4. Image of others
5. Valid communication
6. Problem focus
7. Main system reference

In this material, we have analysed particular structures of communication. According to our specific theoretical understanding, we decided to call differentiated sets of such structures »social positions«. Structures are according to systems theory and other communication theories understood as communicated expectations. Social positions are consequently defined as differentiated sets of communicated expectations.

### *An example: The administrative position*

1. *Relevant actors*: Applicant, experts, politicians, public/citizens
2. *Image of Self*: Authority, controlling experiments; guided by law; responding to citizens
3. *Relevant topics*: Legal aspects, risk issues
4. *Image of others*: Public/citizens as passive figures; community potentially ignorant or unconcerned or guided/misled by activists
5. *Valid communication*: In principle top-down; hierarchical distribution of legal competences; arguing; open, insofar as arguing
6. *Problem focus*: Compliance with legal requirements; decision-making according to legal provisions (risk-related)
7. *Main system reference*: Law

They touch several dimensions, referring to relevant actors, to the communicated image of self, to the relevance or legitimacy of issues or topics, to the communicated image of others (who are they and in how far are they relevant social addressees?), to valid forms of communication (arguing versus bargaining, for instance), to the legitimate problem focus, and to the main system reference.

An example may help understanding the meaning of these structural dimensions. The picture gives some details of a position, which was found in every country and which was very significantly characterised by a sort of legal communication. A rather broad range of relevant actors is linked with a rather hierarchical and centralised model of social relations between these actors. All relevancies are strongly formed by the legal reference of the communication. Other positions are likewise characterised by reference to politics or science, for instance.

It might be important to note, that although being named in a slightly »personale« way, these types do not refer to empirical persons. As defined above, they are understood as social structures. Therefore, they are not linked to individuals and their mental systems. They only describe communicative properties. Persons would change between such positions and would, for instance, take more than one position during the course of a communication. The attribution of an empirical utterance to one of the types does not include a statement about intra-personal processes.

<i>Empirical positions</i>
The administrative position
The local »We« position
The concerned, engaged, or critical individual position
The organised protestor (Environmentalist) position
The scientist position
The politician position
The industrial actor position

The empirical studies resulted in mainly seven different types of social positions, which have been identified in most of the countries. For the purpose of quick identification they have been named as »The Administrator«, »The Local »We««, »The Concerned or Critical Citizen«, »The Organised Protestor«, »The Scientist«, »The Politician«, and »The Industrial Actor«. These positions have been re-constructed in their structural dimensions, which – as was said before – are their communicated images of self and others with respect to relevant actors, valid forms of communication, problem focus, and main system reference. In these respects, the types can be described as being clearly distinct against each other on an analytical level. In the data, we found overlapping forms. But the fact, that these overlapping positions have remained absolutely marginal, shows that the reconstruction of the seven types

of social positions has a general validity for the empirical data, and presumably even beyond the particular study in question.

In a second step, the dynamics between these positions have been reconstructed.

*Dynamics* is another term for the relation between manifestations of social positions in time. How is a single manifestation of a certain social position embedded in a »chain of events«? This chain may include manifestations of the same and of other social positions. Our interest concerns the communicative mechanisms that regulate the operative linkages between the utterances. In our empirical field, we distinguish quite a few patterns of such dynamics with mainly two effects. Some of the dynamics, we observed, have an inclusive effect, which means that they provide for addressability between the positions involved. Other dynamics are exclusive. They are characterised by a structural barrier between the positions, a form of basic non-addressability.

*Dynamics of social positions*

The relation between manifestations of social positions in time.

*Inclusive dynamics:*

Provide for addressability between the positions involved. Characterise a cluster of positions, containing »The Administrator«, »The Scientist«, and »The Industrial Actor«.

*Exclusive dynamics:*

Characterised by a structural barrier between the positions, a form of basic non-addressability. Dominate the relations between the »Administrator« on the one side, and the »Local »We««, the »Concerned Citizen«, the »Organised Protestor«, and the »Politician« on the other.

*Inclusive dynamics* are usually triggered by a cluster of positions, which contains »The Administrator«, »The Scientist«, and »The Industrial Actor« as native components. They all communicate within the scope of expectations that has been set by the legal-procedural framework. The basis of this communication is arguing and the presentation of scientific points of view. The latter does not mean that only »scientists« have the legitimacy to speak. It rather means that questions of truth (and not of power, membership, justice etc.) are at the centre of interest.

The inclusive dynamics may also stretch across citizen positions, namely the »Organised Protestor« and the »Concerned Citizen«, if only they make use of the type of communication mentioned before. However, the inclusion will be precarious in this case, because both citizen positions embed scientific arguing in a more or less instrumental way. It is in both cases destined to serve a political purpose, rather than to fill a legally defined slot.

Inclusive dynamics with resonance between administrator and citizen positions can only be accounted for when the legal framing of the communicative event is weak or suspended (Italy) or when the events belong to the wider public sphere (Sweden).

*Exclusive dynamics* dominate the relations between the »Administrator« on the one side, and the »Local ›We«, the »Concerned Citizen«, the »Organised Protestor«, and the »Politician«, as far as they do not comply with the structural expectations of the administrator position.

The procedural slot offered by the administrator position invites and provokes social positions such as concerned citizen, organised protestor and/or local ›We. This eye-catching positioning work occurs in spite of the fact that the administrator position does not account for any of these social positions as to the slot that is offered. One might even conclude that it is just the vagueness of this slot, which is responsible for this variety of occurring social positions.

We can therefore say: It is the procedural setting that is responsible for the social positioning display in all countries. At the same time, the socio-cultural contexts are different and lead to different kinds of social positions taken by the citizen side. Whereas in Germany, for instance, the »Local We« position comes into play at this step, it is the organised protestor in the NL. In other words, procedure induces the need of social positioning whereas socio-cultural background seems to induce the kind of social position to be enacted.

Apart from these differences, the dynamics are the same at an abstract level in all countries. The administrator position proves impervious to citizen positions, in particular to »The Local ›We«, »The Concerned Citizen«, »The Organised Protestor«, which positions all entail an »active citizen« image of themselves. There is strong evidence for exclusion dynamics: the social positions manifested on the citizen side do not find resonance within the administrator position, but remain excluded in the sense that they cannot be sufficiently dealt with in the legally framed procedure.

We therefore conclude that the legal-procedural framework fosters inclusive *and* exclusive dynamics. As we said before, these dynamics are each closely related to certain positions. Communicated citizenship can be expressed in terms of the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of dynamics. Exclusive dynamics show that citizenship has to be described as an essentially contested concept at this point (Gallie 1955/1956; Connolly 1974). We can see that there are no »connecting« or »translating« links between structurally divergent concepts in different social positions.



### 3. Problems with Participation – Concluding Remarks

In their abstract to the DGS plenum, on which this paper was presented, the organisers had asked, whether there is a »universal« foundation of citizenship. Based on our material, we must say: No, there is no such universal foundation. There is a »universal« social function, namely inclusion in the political system, and there are »particular«, idiosyncratic, and essentially contested foundations in the empirical world. And this picture of the empirical world tells us something about the problems with participation. In this regard, the empirical results confirm earlier research. Moreover, they allow for generalisation over varying legal and political-cultural contexts, showing the general theoretical relevance of the findings: they do not depend on national context.

What is striking is the structural tension between institutional, legally framed forms of citizenship on the one hand and actually expected and communicated forms on the other. One expression of this tension could be called the »administrator's dilemma«. Compared to the programmatic aim of participatory activities in the administration, exclusive dynamics surely is the contrary of what has been intended: namely inclusion, at least to some extent. Given the fact that social positioning has been invited by offering a significantly vague slot, this is also some kind of »self-made« dilemma. It consists of the fact that the legal framing has caused an amount of complexity in terms of social positioning that it cannot cope with in other ways than by exclusion. With respect to legitimacy, such a kind of exclusion dynamics will be highly dysfunctional. Needless to say, we observe complementary or similar problems for all other positions.

The fundamental problem of participatory legal-procedural decision-making is that the interpretive conflict between contested concepts of citizenship cannot be treated sufficiently within the procedure, due to the legal-procedural framework. Dynamics therefore are an effect of the procedure.

Our study has generated detailed insight in these dynamics of social positioning. They have turned out to be far from inclusive in many cases. We could show where and why social positions get into conflict with each other. We have on this basis tried to blaze the trail for institutional and procedural reforms. Finally, the PARADYS project has demonstrated a certain danger that underlies a common »participatory euphoria«. A merely normative approach – insinuating that any »more« in participation will necessarily result in »more« and »better« citizenship – may provoke the exact opposite of more exclusive dynamics and conflict.

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